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"K"

By
Mary Roberts Rinehart

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(Continued From Yesterday.)

CHAPTER XXV.

Johnny Rosenfeld was dead. All of K's skill had not sufficed to save him. The operation had been a marvel, but the boy's long-sapped strength failed at the last. K, set of face, stayed with him to the end. The boy did not know he was going. He roused from the coma and smiled up at Le Moyne.

"I've got a hunch that I can move my right foot," he said. "Look and see."

K lifted the light covering.

"You're right, old man. It's moving."

"Brake foot, clutch foot," said Johnny, and closed his eyes again. K had forbidden the white screens, that outward symbol of death. Time enough for them later. So the ward had no suspicion, nor had the boy. The ward passed in review. It was Sunday, and from the chapel far below came the faint singing of a hymn. When Johnny spoke again he did not open his eyes.

"You're some operator, Mr. Le Moyne. I'll put in a word for you whenever I get a chance."

"Yes, put in a word for me," said K huskily.

He felt that Johnny would be a good

mediator—that whatever he, K, had done of omission or commission, Johnny's voice before the Tribunal would count.

Johnny was close on the edge of his long sleep by that time, and very comfortable. It was K, who, seeing he would no longer notice, ordered the screens to be set around the bed, K, who drew the coverings smooth and folded the boy's hands over his breast. The nurse stood by uncertainly.

"How very young he is! Was it an accident?"

"It was the result of a man's damnable folly," said K, grimly. "Somebody always pays."

And so Johnny Rosenfeld paid.

The immediate result of his death was that K, who had gained some of his faith in himself on seeing Wilson on the way to recovery, was beset by his old doubts. And now came a question that demanded immediate answer. Wilson would be out of commission for several months, probably. He was gaining, but slowly. And he wanted K to take over his work.

"Why not?" he demanded, half irritably. "The secret is out. Everybody knows who you are. And now, because a boy who wouldn't have lived anyhow—"

"That's not it," K put in hastily. "I know all that. I guess I could do it and get away with it as well as the average. All that deters me—I've never told you, have I, why I gave up before?"

Wilson was propped up in his bed. K was walking restlessly about the room, as was his habit when troubled.

"I've heard the gossip; that's all."

"You know what I always felt about the profession, Max. We went into that more than once in Berlin. Either one's best or nothing. I had done pretty well. When I left Lorch and built my own hospital, I hadn't a doubt of myself. And because I was getting results I got a lot of advertising. Men began coming to the clinics. I found I was making

of the patients

who could pay to add a few free wards. I want to tell you now, Wilson, that the opening of those free wards was the greatest self-indulgence I ever permitted myself. I'd seen so much careless attention given the poor—well, never mind that. It was almost three years ago that things began to go wrong. I lost a big case."

"I know. All this doesn't influence me, Edwardes."

"Wait a moment. We had a system in the operating room as perfect as I could devise it. I never finished an operation without having my first assistant verify the clip and sponge count. But that first case died because a sponge had been left in the operating field. You know how those things go; you can't always see them, and one goes by the count, after reasonable caution. Then I almost lost another case in the same way—a free case."

"As well as I could tell, the precautions had not been relaxed. I was doing from four to six cases a day. After the second one I almost went crazy. I made up my mind, if there was ever another, I'd give up and go away."

"There was another?"

"Not for several months. When the last case died, a free case again, I performed my own autopsy. I allowed only my first assistant in the room. He was almost as frenzied as I was. It was the same thing again. When I told him I was going away, he offered to take the blame himself, to say he had closed the incision. He tried to make me think he was responsible. I knew—better."

"It's incredible."

"Exactly; but it's true. The last patient was a laborer. He left a family. I've sent them money from time to time. I used to sit and think about the children he left, and what would become of them. The ironic part of it was that, for all that had happened, I was busier all the time. Men were sending me cases from all over the country. It was either stay and keep on working, with that chance, or—quit. I quit."

"But if you had stayed, and taken extra precautions—"

"We'd taken every precaution we knew."

Neither of the men spoke for a time. K stood, his tall figure outlined against the window.

"That's the worst, is it?" Max Wilson demanded at last.

"That's enough."

"It's extremely significant. You have an enemy somewhere—on your staff, probably. This profession of ours is a big one, but you know its jealousies. Let a man get his shoulders above the crowd, and the pack is after him." He laughed a little. "Mixed figure, but you know what I mean."

K shook his head. He had had that gift of the big man everywhere, in every profession, of securing the loyalty of his followers. He would have trusted every one of them with his life.

"You're going to do it, of course."

"Take up your work?"

"Yes."

He stirred restlessly. To stay on, to be near Sidney, perhaps to stand by as Wilson's best man when she was married—it turned him cold. But he did not give a decided negative. The sick man was flushed and growing fretful; it would not do to irritate him.

"Give me another day on it," he said at last. And so the matter stood.

Max's injury had been productive of good, in one way. It had brought the two brothers closer together. In the mornings Max was restless until Doctor Ed arrived. When he came, he brought books in the shabby bag—his beloved Burns, although he needed no book for that, the "Pickwick Papers," Renan's "Lives of the Disciples." Very

often Max would doze off; but at the cessation of Doctor Ed's sonorous voice the sick man would stir fitfully and demand more. It pleased the older man vastly. It reminded him of Max's boyhood, when he had read to Max at night. For once in the last dozen years, he needed him.

"Go on, Ed. What in blazes makes you stop every five minutes?" Max protested, one day.

Doctor Ed, who had only stopped to bite off the end of a stogie to hold in his cheek, picked up his book in a hurry, and eyed the invalid over it.

"Stop bullying. I'll read when I'm ready. Have you any idea what I'm reading?"

"Of course."

"Well, I haven't. For ten minutes I've been reading across both pages!"

Max laughed, and suddenly put out his hand. Demonstrations of affection were so rare with him that for a moment Doctor Ed was puzzled. Then, rather sheepishly, he took it.

"When I get out," Max said, "we'll have to go out to the White Springs again and have supper."

That was all; but Ed understood.

On the day when K. had told Max his reason for giving up his work, Sidney spent her hour with Max that evening as usual. His big chair had been drawn close to a window, and she found him there, looking out. She kissed him. But instead of letting her draw away, he put out his arms and caught her to him.

"Smile at me. You don't smile any more. You ought to smile; your mouth—"

"I am almost always tired; that's all, Max."

She eyed him bravely.

"Aren't you going to let me make love to you at all? You get away beyond my reach."

"I was looking for the paper to read to you."

A sudden suspicion flamed in his eyes.

"Sidney, you don't like me to touch you any more. Come here where I can see you."

The fear of agitating him brought her quickly. For a moment he was appeased.

"That's more like it. How lovely you are, Sidney!" He lifted first one hand and then the other to his lips. "Are you ever going to forgive me?"

"If you mean about Carlotta, I forgave that long ago."

He was almost boyishly relieved. What a wonder she was! So lovely, and so sane. Many a woman would have held that over him for years—not that he had done anything really wrong on that nightmare excursion. But so many women are exigent about promises.

"When are you going to marry me?"

"We needn't discuss that tonight, Max. Can't we talk things over when you are stronger?"

Her tone caught his attention, and turned him a little white. He faced her to the window, so that the light fell on her.

"What things? What do you mean?"

He had forced her hand. She had meant to wait; but, with his keen eyes on her, she could not dissemble.

"I am going to make you very unhappy for a little while."

"Well?"

"I've had a lot of time to think. It isn't that I am angry. I am not even jealous. I was at first. It isn't that. It's hard to make you understand. I think you care for me—"

"But, good heavens, Sidney, you do care for me, don't you?"

"I'm afraid I don't, Max; not enough."

She tried to explain, rather pitifully. After one look at his face, she spoke to the window.

"I'm so wretched about it. I thought I cared. To me you were the best and greatest man that ever lived. I—when I said my prayers, I—But that doesn't matter. You were a sort of god to me."

He groaned under his breath.

"No man could live up to that, Sidney."

"No. I see that now. But that's the way I cared. It's just that I never loved the real you, because I never knew you."

When he remained silent, she made an attempt to justify herself.

"I'd known very few men," she said. "I came into the hospital, and for a time life seemed very terrible. There were wickednesses I had never heard of, and somebody always paying for them. I was always asking, Why? Why? Then you would come in, and a lot of them you cured and sent out. You gave them their chance, don't you see? Until I knew about Carlotta, you always meant that to me. You were like K.—always helping."

The room was very silent. In the nurses' parlor, a few feet down the corridor, the nurses were at prayers.

"Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—"

The man in the chair stirred. He had come through the valley of the shadow, and for what? He was very bitter. He said to himself savagely that they would better have let him die.

"You say you never loved me because you never knew me. I'm not a rotter, Sidney. Isn't it possible that the man you cared about, who—who did his best by people and all that—is the real me?"

She gazed at him thoughtfully. He missed something out of her eyes, the sort of luminous, wistful greatness. Measured by this new glance, so clear, so appraising, he shrank back into his chair.

"The man who did his best is quite real. You have always done your best in your work; you always will. But the other is a part of you too, Max. even if I care, I would not dare to

(Continued on Page Eight.)

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